



Embassy of the United States of America

Public Affairs Office

PRESS RELEASE

Freetown

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September 7, 2012

Top Military General Makes First Visit to Sierra Leone

(FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE) -- General Carter F. Ham, commander of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) based in Germany, visited Sierra Leone September 5 - 6. It is the first time that General Ham has visited Sierra Leone since taking command in March, 2011.

General Ham's visit comes just weeks before Sierra Leone's planned deployment of 850 troops to the peacekeeping mission in Somalia. The United States is contributing more than \$14 million in training and equipment for the deployment of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) to Somalia in support of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

While in Sierra Leone, General Ham and U.S. Ambassador to Sierra Leone Michael Owen visited with Minister of Defense Alfred Palo Conteh, Chief of Defense Staff Major General Samuel Omar Williams, and other senior military officials as well as Dr. Kaifala Marah, President Ernest Bai Koroma's Chief of Staff, to discuss continuing cooperation on military issues. General Ham visited the Economic Community of West African States Depot, the International Military Assistance Training Team (IMATT), and the Peacekeeping Mission Training Center (PMTC).

In addressing soldiers at the PMTC on September 6, General Ham expressed support for the troops and referred to their mission to Somalia as a "very important mission where you will fight for democracy of the Somali people." He said in his conversations with AMISOM and the Kenya Defense Forces, all parties were anticipating the Sierra Leonean troops' arrival. General Ham commended Sierra Leone on being among the first countries from outside the Horn of Africa to commit to going to Somalia.

Ambassador Owen reminded the troops that "the eyes of the world will be on you" as the troops deploy for and serve in Somalia. "You will show [the world] that you are now one of the best militaries on the continent of Africa. ... You have our greatest respect," Ambassador Owen said. He acknowledged the government of Sierra Leone's strong and unwavering support of the Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance Program (ACOTA) and the mission to Somalia, pointing out Sierra Leone's remarkable transition from civil war to now being a peacekeeping force.

Since 1997, the United States has provided robust peacekeeping training and non-lethal equipment to more than 215,000 peacekeepers from African partner militaries in 238 contingent units. Through ACOTA, AFRICOM provides military mentors, trainers, and advisors. ACOTA is funded and managed by the U.S. Department of State as part of the broader Global Peace Operations Initiative.

AFRICOM is one of six of the U.S. Defense Department's geographic combatant commands and is responsible to the Secretary of Defense for military relations with African nations, the African Union, and African regional security organizations. A full-spectrum combatant command, AFRICOM is responsible for all U.S. Department of Defense operations, exercises, and security cooperation on the African continent, its island nations, and surrounding waters. For more information about AFRICOM, go online to www.africom.mil.